

# Isaiah 40 (Part I)

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## 1 Introduction

In this lecture we begin to study 2 Isaiah, starting with Ch. 40. To this end, we will briefly review the plot of Isaiah up to and before Ch. 40.

## 2 The Story So Far

The story of Isaiah after the incident of Ahaz is best understood by examining Chs. 36–39, which are narratives concerning King Hezekiah the son of Ahaz. The passages are mostly identical to their parallels in 2 Kings 18–20, with minor textual discrepancies (e.g., 2 Kings 20:1–11 vs Isaiah 38:1–22).

### 2.1 Chs. 36–37

- The Assyrian king Sennacherib invaded Judah. Jerusalem was once again under siege. Unlike his father Ahaz, King Hezekiah was able to trust God for deliverance. “Then the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. . . . So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there (Isaiah 37:36–37).”
- The narrative serves to provide a mirror image of the narrative of Ahaz (Chs. 7–8), demonstrating the example of a trusting king.
- In the bible when two passages of similar topics or forms “sandwich” a middle section, it usually signifies a recognizable unit of interpretation in which the middle section is to be interpreted in the light of the surrounding sections. Between Chs. 7–12 and Chs. 36–39 are oracles concerning the future judgments of nations hostile to Judah, as well as visions of the future Judah. The purpose of many of these passages are to point out the fact that God, rather than the nations, should be trusted

### 2.2 Chs. 38–39

There are two recognizable narratives: Ch. 38, concerning the illness and healing of Hezekiah, and Ch. 39, concerning the Babylonian envoys. There is strong historical evidence that the events

described in these chapters actually precede those of Chs. 36–37. The reorganization of events found in Isaiah probably makes it easy to brought out the plot of the Isaianic story.

**Ch. 38:** This narrative describes the illness and healing of Hezekiah. It motivates the Babylonian narrative that follows, and also contains a psalm of Hezekiah that foreshadows the death and regeneration of the nation.

**Ch. 39:** This narrative provides the causal link between 1 Isaiah and 2 Isaiah, and implicitly introduces the Babylonian exile before Ch. 40 begins.

### 3 The Babylonian Exile

- In the year 587 BC, Jerusalem fell under the hands of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. A large number of population in Judah were exiled to Babylon. Judah ceases to be a nation. See 2 Kings 25 for details.
- Modern readers who are used to a secular world view may have difficulty appreciating the existential impact of the exilic experience. The Babylonian exile destroys not only a dynasty, but rather the entire self-understanding of God's people. If Jerusalem is not invincible, is God still the Lord of the Universe? If even the Temple can be destroyed, is God still with us? If Israel ceases to be a people, but rather hold captive in the empire of Babylon, is she still the servant of God? If the Davidic throne is no more, how is the blessing of Abraham going to reach the world? Who are we? And what are we here for?
- Perhaps the exilic experience can be better understood by modern readers through a metaphorical reading of Hezekiah's psalm in Ch. 38, especially vv. 10–14.
- In the words of Brueggemann, there is a “long pause” of some 150 years between 39:8 and 40:1, a pause filled with the anguish of vv. 38:10–14.
- After this enduring silence comes a new voice: “Comfort, comfort my people.”

### 4 Comfort, Comfort My People (40:1–11)

The core questions answered by 2 Isaiah in general, and Ch. 40 in particular, are the following:

1. Does God care?
2. Can God help?

In this chapter you will find many voices and speakers. The setting is likely that of the heavenly court. Proper interpretation requires careful distinction of the voices.

**vv. 1–2:** The voice of God: a tone of comfort. The verse presumes that the exile has already occurred.

**vv. 3–5:** Voice #2:

- a highway from Babylon, across the desert, and back to Israel.

**vv. 6–8:**

- Voice #3: v. 6a: a call to proclaim
- Voice #4: vv. 6b–7
  - a complaint
  - alluding to the fading flower of 28:1–4
- Voice #3: v. 8: the basis of hope and salvation lies not in human efforts, but in the enduring words of God

**vv. 9–11:** God returning as a powerful and yet gentle shepherd

## **5 Reflection**

- We have been talking about the Church being the people of God, the new Israel. We discussed this notion without considering an important fact: that the people of God is embedded in a world hostile to its message. Thus maybe the exilic context is actually a better description of the existential condition of the Christian Church — life in an empire.
- Living in an empire reigned by an ideology of idolatry, God’s people is faced with an insurmountable adversary that threatens her existence. How then can we still live out the vocation of priesthood? How can we be a light to the nations when we are held captive in a powerful and yet hostile empire? Maybe the message of Isaiah is ever relevant to us: our hope rests in the very fact that “the word of our God stands forever”, that He still cares, and that He will one day return to live among us.